

# Men's Sheds – Sharing knowledge and learning in the company of men

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## **Abstract**

*Despite evidence of the benefits of learning for well-being across diverse groups, little is known about older men's experiences of learning, the factors that influence whether they choose to engage in learning activities and what role learning plays in their lives as they grow older. The present study examines the attitudes and learning behaviours of older men participating in Men's Sheds in Ireland. Our findings point to the importance of Men's Sheds as sites of informal learning that encourage the sharing of skills, knowledge and wisdom between older men. We conclude that Men's Sheds facilitate sensitive conversations between older men as they actively engage in constructing masculine behaviours and identities in later life.*

**Keywords:** older men, informal learning, masculinities, Men's Sheds

## **Introduction**

Ireland has a rapidly ageing population, having grown at a rate of between 17 and 20 per cent since 2011 (Central Statistics Office, 2016). Within this, older men constitute one of the fastest growing cohorts in the population. In 2011 the Census of the Population recorded a total of 763,557 men aged 45 and over living in Ireland (Central Statistics Office, 2016). In 2015, this was estimated to have risen to 829,500 (ibid.), a trend that is expected to continue for the foreseeable future.

In the past, education and learning beyond the age of 50 was considered of little or no value to the individual or society, given the lower life expectancy at the time. Today, rising longevity has increased the value and importance of learning throughout life. The concept of lifelong learning is now considered the means by which economies can prosper, employment can grow and citizens

can be actively engaged and feel included. As the Commission of the European Communities (2011) argues, the challenge for Member States is to provide learning opportunities for adults throughout their life. To this end, Ireland is aiming to achieve the 15 per cent EU benchmark for participation in lifelong learning by 2020 (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2016).

While adult learning has been shown to provide resources that can help fuel important changes in individuals' lives (Field, 2011), many leave school feeling disillusioned with education. Men in particular who left school early or who left with little or no qualifications are least likely to participate in adult education. Evidence shows that men account for just 25 per cent of participants of community education programmes in Ireland (Community Education Facilitators' Association, 2014). In addition, the Statement of Activity for 2015 from the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2016) confirms that 60 per cent of all lifelong learning participants are third level graduates and largely (57%) female. Similar gender patterns have been identified elsewhere, including in the United Kingdom (McGivney, 2004a) and Australia (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, & Gleeson, 2007).

The present study is set against the backdrop of a steady growth of community-based Men's Sheds in Ireland in which a growing number of men are readily coming together to share skills and to learn new skills in spaces that are largely but not exclusively for men. Using data from the first study of community-based Men's Sheds in Ireland, we examine attitudes to learning among older men (aged 50+ years) and the factors that have influenced the decisions of older men to engage in shed-based learning activities in such large numbers and the outcomes from participation.

## **Literature Review**

### *What are Men's Sheds?*

Men's Sheds are defined as community based non-commercial organisations that provide "a safe, friendly and healing environment where men are able to work on meaningful projects at their own pace in their own time in the company of other men" (AMSA, nd.). This Australian phenomenon first emerged in Ireland in 2009 when the first Men's Shed opened in Tipperary. Since then, the number of sheds registered with the Irish Men's Shed Association (IMSA) has increased steadily and now stands at 308, a similar density per head of population to that found in Australia (B. Golding, pers. comm.). Men's Sheds typically have a workshop space with tools and equipment as well as a social space for "tea

and a chat” (Carragher & Golding, 2015). The most common activity in sheds is woodwork but some have activities such as painting and cooking. Activities are decided by the men and largely provided by them through the sharing of their skills, unless a particular skill-set is not available in which case an outside tutor is sourced (Carragher, 2013).

The present study represents the first attempt to examine Men’s Sheds as sites for learning, including informal learning by older men in Ireland. Informal learning is said to come from daily activities related to work, family and or leisure and is usually non-intentional (European Commission, 2001) as opposed to non-formal learning which is intentional learning from the learner’s perspective and is structured in terms of its learning objectives and outcomes (European Commission, 2006). To date, little is known about older men’s experiences of learning, the factors that influence whether or not they choose to engage in learning activities and what role informal learning plays in their lives as they grow older.

#### *Older men and formalised systems of education and training*

In responding to calls to widen participation in learning, evidence has shown how formalised systems of education and training based on assessment and examinations often fail to attract those disillusioned by previous, negative learning experiences (Barton, Ivani, Appleby, Hodge, & Tusting, 2007; McGivney, 1999; Smith, Hamblett, & Holden, 2001).

In the UK, McGivney (1999, 2004a, 2004b) drew attention to the role played by a dominant male culture which perceives learning as effeminate, particularly by men living in working class areas (McGivney, 1999, 2004a, 2004b). Men aged 50+ were found to be among the least likely group to participate in learning outside of training associated with the enhancement of skills and employment prospects (McGivney, 1999). In Australia, Golding *et al.* (2007) identify male underrepresentation in community education programmes for much the same reasons as those found by McGivney among men in the UK. Entrenched gender differences have also been found in community education in Ireland, with some commentators drawing attention to the feminisation of education (Owens, 2000; O’Connor, 2007; Department of Education & Skills, 2009), arguably with some justification given the low participation of men in community education programmes. A study of isolation and exclusion amongst men between 35 and 65 years of age living in North Leitrim, Ireland, draws attention to the lack of interest in pursuing further education among men with no qualifications

(North Leitrim Men's Group, 2001). One reason put forward for their lack of interest was the low levels of self-confidence, which many of the men felt about continuing in education.

This draws attention to the importance of non-cognitive or “soft skills”, which in addition to self-confidence also includes attitudes, learning behaviours, and learning strategies. Such attributes have been found to play an important role in learning outcomes (Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001; Gutman & Schoon, 2013). Evidence shows that students who are motivated have confidence in their capabilities and feel a sense of belonging to their class or desired social group (Ryan & Patrick, 2001) and are more likely to be high achievers than those who possess lower self-perceptions about their capabilities and have lower motivation (McCoach, & Siegle, 2001; Pintrich, 2003). We contend that older learners are no different; they must be motivated to participate in learning in the first instance and maintain their motivation if they are to persist with their learning until the learning activity is completed (McGivney, 2004b). In particular, we argue the provision of meaningful learning activities represents an important prerequisite for the participation of older men in learning. This paper draws on data from a survey of community-based Men's Sheds in Ireland to consider older men's readiness to engage in learning in Men's Sheds and the attributes which have brought them to learning in such large numbers.

## **Method**

A mixed methods design was adopted, with both questionnaires and focus groups used to overcome the limitations of a single method alone (Ponterotto, Mathew, & Raughley, 2013). Mixed methods give voice to study participants (Wisdom & Creswell, 2013) ensuring findings are grounded in participants' experiences, their involvement in Men's Sheds and barriers to and motivation for participation. Our survey design and research protocol were informed by a study of Men's Sheds in Australia (Golding *et al.* 2007; Golding, Foley, Brown, & Harvey 2009). This included two survey instruments, the first of which was designed to elicit information about sheds. As this is the first survey of Men's Sheds in Ireland, we were interested to ascertain key features, such as where sheds are located, how they are funded, how they are managed etc. The second survey was designed to elicit information about participants. Specifically, we were interested to know who are the participants in Men's Sheds, what are the reasons for participation and what are the outcomes from participation.

Questions for both surveys were adapted where necessary for an Irish context. Demographic questions focussed on age and educational background as well as participants' personal life and relationships. We were concerned to profile the characteristics of those who typically attend Men's Sheds, their marital and cohabitation status, their family make-up (e.g. father, grandfather) and key life events experienced in the past five years (e.g. separation, unemployment, retirement, a significant loss, a major health crisis, a new personal relationship, a new child or grandchild). Closed-ended questions were used to examine learning in Men's Sheds (e.g. "If more learning opportunities were available through this shed, would you be interested in taking part?" "Yes/No"). Follow-up multiple choice questions were used to determine preferences for learning (e.g. "If yes, which type of learning would you be interested in?": "a course to get a qualification; special interest courses; in a small group; field days or demonstrations; in a class; through the Internet; by taking on responsibility; through preparation for further study; where I can meet other people; [and] individual tuition").

Other questions were posed as statements, with respondents invited to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements, from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. These statements, which were not mutually exclusive, were designed to identify reasons for participation in Men's Sheds (e.g. "I am doing what I really enjoy; to be with other men; to get out of the house; to learn new skills" etc.) and outcomes from participation (e.g. "a place where I belong; I get access to men's health information" etc.). Multiple choice questions were also used to examine learning in Men's Sheds (e.g. "there is too much emphasis on learning things I can already do; "my skills are already good enough for me to be able to take an active part in this organisation; "there is too much importance placed on formal learning" etc.).

In line with an 'interpretive and naturalistic approach', which holds that researchers need to study things in their natural settings to make sense of phenomena and the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000 p. 3), a series of five focus groups were conducted on completion of survey analyses. Visits to sheds provided valuable opportunities for the researchers to observe what happens in sheds and how men engage with each other and learning activities. Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes and collectively involved 40 consenting adults. Conversations were recorded and transcribed verbatim, with field notes used to aid transcription, particularly where it was difficult to understand what was said when more than one person spoke at a time. Ethical clearance was granted for this research before fieldwork commenced. Although

the fieldwork was largely completed in late 2012, returned questionnaires were accepted until early 2013. All sheds registered with the IMSA were invited to participate, with the actual number of surveys distributed to sheds determined by coordinators of sheds in line with their membership. In all, 445 questionnaires were distributed.

## **Results**

### *Participant Demographics*

A total of 347 questionnaires were returned, including 50 incomplete ones, which were subsequently excluded, giving a sample size of 297 and a response rate of 65.2 per cent. All respondents were male and the majority were aged 50+ (71%,  $n = 210$ ). Seventy per cent ( $n = 207$ ) were married or had previously been married and 58 per cent ( $n = 172$ ) were currently living with their wife or partner. Nearly three quarters (72%) were fathers and nearly half (45%) were also grandfathers. Most respondents were retired from paid work and in receipt of some type of pension (53%), with just 15 per cent currently in paid work. Just over half (51%) had no formal qualifications and were educated to primary or secondary school level only. Forty-five per cent identified themselves as a current or former tradesman. However, as our findings suggest, this may well be a status earned through life experience rather than through formal education since just 20 per cent actually held a technical or vocational qualification.

### *Motivation and Persistence in Learning*

Respondents were motivated to participate in Men's Sheds by a need for peer support and to be doing something that they considered meaningful. This was expressed as a need "to get out of the house" (95%), "to be with other men" (95%) and a preference for "hands-on learning" (71%), as opposed to "learning in classroom situations" (29%). There was an eagerness to access "more learning in sheds" (97%) and to "improve skills" (94%).

Financial issues were not found to motivate participation, although one third (34%) said that they hoped to get more paid work through participation in sheds. Similarly, support from family and friends was not a motivating factor for participation. Rather, the opposite seems to be the case, with men choosing to join the shed due to limited support, reflected in the range of recent, major life events experienced by respondents, including a significant loss (24%), a financial crisis (23%), unemployment (41%) and depression (23%).

### *The Social Environment and Attitudes to Learning*

The importance of the shed environment was expressed by respondents as “I enjoy the social aspect” (100%), “I enjoy being able to participate when I want to” (99%), “I am doing what I really enjoy” (98%), “I have some say over how the shed is run” (91%) and “being part of this shed helps me to learn” (95%). In contrast, we found little enthusiasm for learning within formal adult education settings, with just 19 per cent indicating that they had attended a formal learning programme in the past year. Our findings confirm older men’s previous detachment from formal learning, with just one in three (33%) reporting a positive educational experience at school. The shed’s small size was seen as particularly important to respondents (92%) and within this space, experience and involvement in learning informally created a desire to carry on learning. They expressed this as “members of this shed need more opportunities to learn” (89%), “I am keen to learn more” (97%) and “I would like to improve my skills” (94%).

### *A Sense of Belonging*

Respondents related positively to learning in Men’s Sheds, and expressed this as “I feel at home in this shed” (98%) and “I have made good friends in this shed” (98%). Their participation made them feel productive and valuable to their community and they expressed this as “I feel better about myself” (97%), “I feel happier at home” (74%), “I can give back to the community” (97%), “I feel more accepted in the community” (86%) and “I have a place where I belong” (95%). We found a remarkable willingness among older men to regularly participate in shed-based activities, with the majority (91%) taking an active part in the learning opportunities available, sometimes on a *daily basis* (12%), sometimes *several times a week* (29%) or *at least once a week* (50%).

### *Older Men’s Beliefs about their Capabilities*

Previous research confirms that school plays a key part in shaping male identities and patterns of learning behaviour (Mark & Golding, 2012). Many of the men consulted for this research left school with no formal qualifications and harboured negative attitudes towards formal education, despite the intervening years. They complained that opportunities for learning elsewhere in their community were limited (70%), that there was no place locally that they considered a good place to learn (79%), that there were not enough learning situations where men were encouraged (68%), that there were not enough male tutors available locally (57%) and that there was nothing that they really wanted to learn (91%). Yet as our findings show, these same men exuded a confidence

in learning in Men's Sheds and in their role in learning activities. They expressed this as "my skills are already good enough for me to be able to take an active part in this organization" (82%), "I get a chance to mentor others" (84%) and "being part of this organisation helps me to learn" (95%). This self-confidence was expressed by one man as:

"I could take an engine out, pull it apart and throw it over there and come back next week...and put it back together again. And I learnt all of that myself. I never went to school to learn any of that. I never read a book about it or anything."

Our research confirms that learning activities in Men's Sheds are largely provided by members through the sharing of skills. Accordingly, older men actively construct their own understanding and benefit of learning, not only in initiating and regulating learning activities but in their interactions with other men. This was expressed as "I regard this shed as a place...to be with other men" (94%), "to meet new friends" (99%), "to get out of the house" (95%), "to help me keep healthy" (95%), "to learn new skills" (97%) and "to give back to the community" (95%).

#### *Learning and Well-Being*

Traditional gender differences between men and women hold that women share more with each other than men do and tend to reveal more about their private lives, while men are widely perceived as preferring not to talk about personal issues and to be more competitive than women (Coates, 1986). Our findings do not support this claim. Rather, they point to the health-promoting effect of belonging to a social network that encourages empathy, openness, and all-round healthier life styles, fostering better coping mechanisms for older men to deal with the stresses and strains of life and life transitions in particular. Thus we found a spill-over effect from sheds to the private sphere of men's lives, reaching areas of personal relationships and men's sense of self-identity. In the words of one man:

"You'll get a man who'll say "I'm taking a tablet [medication]," and you say, I'm taking the same and he'll say, "What are you taking it for? Once one starts ..."

Men's sensitivity in social interactions in Men's Sheds is captured in the comments of this man:



“I got diagnosed with a health condition...so I told [the men] individually and I found people very helpful and without being intrusive they look out for me, but at the same time they don’t go overboard or aren’t overbearing. I found it easy to tell [the men], but I found it hard to reach the stage where I could tell them and I hope I didn’t over-tell it.”

### *Limitations of the Study*

Given that Men’s Sheds are a recent phenomena in Ireland, sheds that have been open longest may have been more motivated to respond to the survey than sheds that opened more recently. Even though this is the first study of Men’s Sheds in Ireland, it nonetheless provides important information on shed-based learning by older men, paving the way for future research including more qualitative cases studies.

### **Discussion**

As in Australia, we found that Men’s Sheds in Ireland are largely frequented by older men who are retired from paid work or have lost their jobs. They come to sheds to get out of the house and to do something which they consider meaningful in the company of other men. We have included “the company of men” in our paper title not only because of its critical importance in terms of our own study findings, but also because this was the name a group of older men gave to themselves as self-managers of the very first Men’s Shed in the world, which opened in rural Tongala, Australia in July 1998 (Golding, 2015).

Historically older men have been one of the most difficult groups to engage in learning. Yet, as our research confirms, older men are readily engaging in a wide range of hands-on learning in Men’s Sheds and are eager for more learning opportunities. It is our contention that the male learning space plays an important role in this. Our findings reveal the reasons why older men come to Men’s Sheds. In addition to being in the company of other men, these reasons are related to participating in activities they enjoy, to having a degree of control over determining what activities take place and to making learning apply to their lives. We conclude that older men view learning as most desirable when it is relevant and can be used by them.

While the prevailing negative health and medical discourse on male pathologies conceptualise men as largely not interested in their health (Brown, 2014), we found older men are accessing health information in different ways in Men’s Sheds. One important way in which they are doing this is through conversations

with their peers; conversations which reveal their sensitivity as they actively engage in constructing masculine behaviours and identities for later life.

### **Conclusions**

Our evidence confirms the importance of meaningful learning activities, reflected in an eagerness among participants of Men's Sheds to carry on learning. This has important lessons for educators and policy makers in terms of the development of interventions that address the different needs and situations of hard-to-reach groups. As Leadbeater (2000, pp. 111-112) argues, "the most important capability and the one which traditional education is worst at creating is the ability and yearning to carry on learning...more learning needs to be done...in the contexts where knowledge is deployed to solve problems and add value to people's lives." We argue that Men's Sheds are conducive to men's learning and, as such, can also provide the context for future targeted interventions to improve the quality of life of older men. One obvious way in which this could happen would be through targeted grassroots interventions which support better health and wellbeing outcomes for older men.

Providers need to recognise how older men learn and the importance of non-cognitive attributes in learning outcomes. They must be sensitive to previous negative experiences of many older men to formal systems of education and how this requires a different approach to learning, one that is informal, self-directed and hands-on. Crucially for older men, this needs to be in group settings made up of people not just of a similar age but also of the same gender.

Finally, given the dearth of literature on the nature of masculinities in later life, we conclude that Men's Sheds provide important sites for future studies to advance our understanding of the impact on men of changes resulting from altered roles and relationships in later life, and more broadly of life and learning beyond men's paid work.

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